Most people can describe their writing process, but very few consider how they go about reading. This handout will focus on strategies for improving your reading skills.

### Your Reading Process

Just as you should work on improving your writing process, you should also work on improving your reading process. Your reading process involves everything that you do before, during, and after you read. As with writing, your process will change depending on the type of text you are reading: you would not read a poem the same way you would read a scientific journal article. Try to develop a flexible reading process based on the general principles of this handout.

#### Before Reading

**Preview Your Text**

In order to get a general sense of what your text is about, preview it by creating a mental outline. Do this by looking at the front and back covers, the title, and the table of contents. Within each chapter, read the introduction, topic sentences, and the conclusion. Be sure to look at any illustrations, graphs, or charts.

**Assess Your Knowledge**

Before reading your text, you need to assess two things: what you know about the text and what you do not know. Do this by asking specific questions:

- What do I know about this book? What don’t I know?
- What do I know about the author? What don’t I know?
- What do I know about the argument? What don’t I know?
- What do I know about the subject? What don’t I know?
- What do I know about the context? What don’t I know?

**Determine Your Purpose**

Determine what you want to get out of your text. Ask yourself, “Why am I reading this?” Don’t set your purpose in terms of simply knowing something; describe what you want to be able to do with your knowledge. Be sure to write this down.

**Example**: I need to read this article on the history of health disparities among communities of color so that I...
am able to put the causes of present-day health disparities among African Americans into context for my readers.

Prepare Your Environment
As you look for a place to read, be sure to eliminate distractions: clutter, technology, and other people. You also want to find a reading position that is comfortable but not too comfortable. Help your body signal to your mind that you are about to learn about the subject, not that you are about to laze around the house.

Prepare Your Mind
If your mind is particularly cluttered, consider doing a “brain dump” exercise: write whatever comes to mind for three pages. Do not censor yourself; just write whatever is in your head, even if it is simply “I have nothing to write.”

Prepare Your Materials
To get the most out of your reading, you will need to do some writing. Be sure to have a pen, a highlighter, and some paper on hand. If you are reading a text with difficult vocabulary, you might also want a dictionary.

Note: For more information and practice on preparing your environment, mind, and materials to read, please see our “Writer’s Block” handout.

During Reading

Annotate Your Text
Highlighting is the least active form of annotating. Instead of simply underlining text, use the whole page as a space for learning. Write notes in the margin. Make numbered lists that correspond to ideas in the text. Using symbols and abbreviations is also helpful.

- c.f. = confer, “compare.” Use to introduce connections to other ideas.
- n.b. = nota bene “note well.” Use to mark important points.
- i.e. = id est, “it is.” Use to introduce definitions.
- e.g. = exempli gratia, “for the sake of example.” Use to introduce your own examples.
- * = Use to mark important points.

Synthesize Your Text
After reading each paragraph, write a brief summary in the margin. Keep it short: imagine that you are going to post this summary on Twitter, which only allows tweets of 140 characters.

Example: kidney disease affects African Americans twice as much as whites

Note: For more information on how to synthesize a text, please see our “Synthesizing Information” handout.

Map Your Text
In addition to synthesizing information as you read, you will need to keep track of the overall shape of the text. To do this, you will need to make a map of the argument. This map could be as simple as creating a reverse outline of the text, or, if you are more visually inclined, you might map with a drawing or flowchart.
Note: For more information on how to reverse outline, please see our “Organization” handout.

Connect Your Text

As you read, build on your prior knowledge. If an idea reminds you of something that you have read or seen before, be sure to make a note in the margin. This will help make the text more relevant and concrete in your mind.

Example: This author’s argument that black communities are disproportionately affected by diseases is similar to last week’s class reading, where Johnson argues that kidney disease affects African Americans twice as much as whites.

Interrogate Your Text

Turn your reading into a conversation. As you make your way through text, be sure to ask questions that challenge the author and the argument.

Note: For more information on how to interrogate a text, please see our “Analyzing Information” handout.

After Reading

Explain Your Text

One of the best ways to learn something is to teach it. To help solidify your knowledge of the text, find someone to explain it to. Encourage this person to ask questions if he or she doesn’t understand a concept. If you can’t find someone to explain it to in person, look into a mirror and explain it to yourself. It is important to do this out loud.

Review Your Text

Go back over your notes once you have finished reading. As you reread, try to get a sense of the larger idea of the text or any recurring themes.

Summarize Your Text

In your notes or in the text itself, write a brief summary of the entire text, focusing on the main argument or plot or theme. You may want to do this on a chapter-by-chapter basis.

Note: For more information on how to summarize, please see our “Incorporating Sources” handout.

Apply Your Text

After you have finished your reading, think of other places where you could apply what you have learned.

Example: This reading, where the author gives an in-depth description of the populations most affected by sickle cell disease, would be useful for my paper about health disparities in communities of color.

Reevaluate Your Purpose

Review the purpose that you wrote down before your reading. Have you achieved it? If not, you will need to assess why you were not able to reach your goal.

Example: I was not able to achieve my goal of finding a data set to reference for my literature review because the focus of this article was on the authors’ next steps rather than their previous findings.
References